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The HERO *of the* WEST

*A Romance of the Valley, the Prairie
and the Mountain*

By
FORREST G. BYLOFF

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Hassler-DeAtley Pub. Co.
BOYERS, PA.

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To My Mother

WHOSE KINDLY COUNSEL HAS, SO
FAITHFULLY AND WELL, GUIDED AND
ENRICHED ME THROUGH MY YOUTH-
FUL YEARS, I RESPECTFULLY DEDI-
CATE THIS BOOK IN APPRECIATION.

They climbed the rock-built breasts of earth,
The Titan-fronted, blowy steeps
That cradled Time. Where freedom keeps
Her flag of bright, blown stars unfurled,
They climbed and climbed. They saw the birth
Of sudden dawn upon the world;
Again they gazed; they saw the face
Of God, and named it boundless space.

—“The Ship In The Desert.”

Joaquin Miller.

PREFACE.

"The Hero of The West" is a complete story in itself. In penning this tale I bore it in mind to acquaint my readers with the ins and outs of Western life, showing what man is called upon to do, and what troubles men of ill reputation are still in the habit of making. The boundless field is one about which very little is written, although weighty in interest, and one which is worthy the most sincere attention of all who possess the proper development of our country at heart.

To many, I presume, certain scenes in this book seem exceedingly exaggerated, but I truthfully say that such is far from being the case. I have tried to picture the mountain, the valley, and the desert just as nearly exact as I understand. Men to whom this land has been a home, are no longer stirred by the power of friendship, chivalry or love—the deep-seated, unmovable emotions of Western life. Heat, loneliness, toil, fear, ferocity, pain, thirst, hunger—he knows them all; yes, he has felt the white sun and its lurid fire; the insupportable silence, the empty ride, the long climb, the plod in hot sand, the search, search, the eager search for that glittering pool of clear cool water.

No one who makes a trip to the West should fail to visit this section of God's domain, around and about which place this story comes to pass. As a scenic wonder its many attractions cannot be exag-

gerated. No lover of nature, no artist, no novelist ever visited this soul-inspiring spot and saw its wonders without admitting that they are far more picturesque than his or her most extravagant notions had ever pictured them.

F. G. BYLOFF.

Kewanee, Illinois,, October 1917.

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"The Hero Of The West."

CHAPTER I.

Something About the Homestead.

The West is full of romance! It is a portion of God's Great Domain, inhabited by various classes of the human race. Each individual comes to seek his fortune in one way or the other;—The cowboy seeks his cattle; the miner his gold; while the half-naked Indian commingles with his brethren about the saloon door. These characteres are most varied in manner; some are honest laboring men from the plain, the gulch or the mountain, while others, with practically the same facial features, chance to be 'Stage Robbers,' gamblers and fakers of many types. The traveler or adventurer to whom the thrill of this strange land appeals, had best enter the territory with full knowledge of the man or men with whom he intends to deal, for, remember, they have gone to meet fortune; not defeat!

The sun had peeped over the horizon with all its splendor, making that portion of the continent exceedingly hot that day. The ball of radiant fire was now fairly at the zenith, and though there were many places of cool shelter, there were none that suited Nathan Henderson's fancy any better than the little log cabin in the dell.

He was a boy of nineteen, tall and strong for his years, possessed with shiny black hair and a pair of blue eyes. The firmness of mind and statliness of figure had won him a name not to be ashamed of.

"It seems a long way," had been his mother's objection, "and you are all I have now, Nathan, so do be careful."

"Never fear, mother, I shall be very cautious."

Mrs. Henderson had just received a telegram from her sister in Rockville, Maryland, stating that the latter was critically ill and that all relatives were to be summoned immediately to her bedside. It was while Nathan was planning his journey that his mother left for Maryland on an extended visit.

"I shall be apt to remain there for some time, Nathan, so if you will, I prefer you taking the deeds along with you, as my time will be very much taken up, and furthermore, I fear I shall not be able to give them due consideration;" then she paused. "And perhaps, you may see fit to use them to great advantage."

The conversation was here concluded.

One bright morning a few days later, Raymond Boswell, a true friend of young Henderson, and who had agreed to accompany the latter on the western trip, came running up the front steps of the Henderson home. He was also a pleasant-faced, stalwart youth, with the fine formed figure of a trained athlete, owning a square chin and well designed nose—and in all, he was the proud possessor of an elegant appearance. Nathan met Ray-

mond on the porch and at once they began talking over plans for their long journey.

"Now, then," broke in Nat, as we will call him. "The next thing to do is to supply ourselves with outfits." And so they did, for within a week they were off.

The journey was reported a successful one, with nothing of any importance occurring.

They arrived at Kelso, Idaho, near the midnight hour, and after alighting, they found themselves on the tiny wooden platform of the dark railway station. The night was rather chilly and as the boys turned about, searching for someone from whom reliable information could be had, the sharp air nipped their lungs. To the north, after the long train had pulled out, one could behold the few shadowy buildings looming mysteriously in the night, and beyond this a distance lurking wood blurred the star-sprinkled heavens.

Directly across the tracks from the station, a lone shanty was pricked from the dark by a solitary lamp in the lower-story apartment.

"That must be the boarding house, Ray," broke out Nat, suddenly.

They concluded to discover the business of the house; whether it was a saloon, or such a place as would afford them a night's lodging.

They were met at the steps by the proprietor. He was a short, fleshy man, dressed rather sabbily, yet his expressions were none the worse for that. His little round face was lit by a pair of glowing eyes,

and though somewhat wrinkled it never seemed to grow tiresome to the spectator.

He led them in, and after a brief conversation, they were taken to their room on the second floor.

The next morning, after having visited the Government's Land Office and filed a claim, they set out to make a more thorough investigation of the vicinity. For the first time, the boys beheld the real town of Kelso in daylight. What a place! There were but few houses, and those were of the cheapest sort. The business section consisted of one building under which scores of various articles could be purchased.

* * * * *

Some months later we find them comfortably located in the woods, some two miles from the town. The hut in which they lived had at one time been occupied, so the boys learned, by a rich hermit. This man had left the vicinity almost as mysteriously as he had entered it, for to this day no one can intelligently account for his sudden disappearance. Thus the cabin had been left undisturbed, and the furniture as well. Although the exterior of the hut was rather shabby at the time of the boys arrival, the interior possessed a very tidy appearance. It is true, however, that the articles were dusty, but as for order everything was just as the old man had left it. On the walls hung skins of various kinds, an old musket or hunting knife hanging half concealed within the folds. The old fire-place which

stood in the north and west corner formed part of the household necessity, having furnished warmth for nearly fifteen long winters. Other essential things went to make up the comfort of the cabin.

The outside, though disorderly, had some features worth mentioning. The hut lay in a deep valley, enclosed by high hills. A tiny pond, which glinted brightly in the dazzling sunshine, filled a low strip of land,—around which grew part of the dense timberland—trees and underbrush. To the west were tall mountains, hidden in a bluish mist; to the south were vast forests and plains; and in the northern direction stood the continuation of that western range, serving as an elegant protector against the biting gales which passed in those parts during the stiff winter months. The sun was always seen as it rose above the very horizon for a level bit of prairie stretched far in that direction.

In a fairly large clearing stood the homestead, with an old-fashioned bucket-well at its rear. Ivy and other vines clung to the outer walls, giving it an unusual grand appearance, not to be seen elsewhere in that vicinity.

The boys had now lived in this vale nearly four months, and gradually they were becoming accustomed to the climate. Although it was dreadfully hot at times, an occasional rain would cool the air to a great extent, consequently this would renew their vigor, and again they would fight the coming heat.

It was a spell of this very kind through which they were now passing. They had been compelled to seek shelter within the walls of the cabin in order to avoid the blistering rays of the noontide sun. And it was as Ray was sitting in an old-fashioned arm chair with his inevitable pipe between his teeth, that he chanced a glance in the direction of the mountains. He threw back his head to listen. From a great distance came the hoarse rumble of thunder, echoing and re-echoing. Then to the westward, crawling over Mount Artic, approached a dense mass of black clouds, that grew more ominous each instant.

"I'm afraid we're in for a storm, Nat," said the boy, "and a bitter one, too."

He was right—already the wind was gradually rising with a dull, humming sound, and the trees swaying gently. The sky, too, seemed rapidly darkening, concealing the orange-glowing sun. Soon rain was heard as it came pattering down on the roof of the cabin. Harder and harder it fell until at length it came in broad sheets; so compacted, indeed, that one could not see twenty feet ahead.

During this time the wind had increased considerably, its velocity being simply terrific. Both Nat and Ray had witnessed many a storm, but none to compare to the one which now swept the valley.

"This certainly is fierce!" gasped Nat, after several minutes had passed.

"It's a regular hurricane!" was the return.

A peculiar humming now filled the air, followed by the crashing of some great tree. The thunder rolled, the lightning flashed and then came another crash. The boys were momentarily dazed and stood there like petrified statues.

"This is awful!" groaned Ray when he came to his right senses; but Nat heard him not, nor were his remarks audible. The hissing wind had found an opening in the cabin and through this it was whistling, drowning all other disturbances.

Crack! Boom; down went another tree.

Glancing about him, Ray saw his partner rushing about the place hysterically.

"Close that door, man! or we'll be blown sky-high!" yelled Nat to Ray.

In a few moments the door was closed, and though the wind did find some entrance through the cracks in the wall, the openings did not, however, afford quite as much as had the door. Soon the first fury of the storm was spent; but still it continued to blow and rain, this continuing well into the night.

Morning found them still in the cabin, unharmed by the storm, which had swept that portion of the country the day previous. The birds were twittering; and the cattle bellowing, for everything seemed more life-like than it had the day before. Even the blades of tough prairie grass seemed clearer, as it waved to and fro in the gentle breeze that swept the vale.

Shortly after seven in the morning, the boys returned to the task at which they had been working the day before. It was the felling of a large pine which stood on the sloping hillside northeast of the cabin. With its enormous branches stretched forth and its top against the distant snow-capped mountain made it look rather peculiar, especially to the boys when they had first come to those parts. Although the storm had done untold damage to other pines in the neighboring vicinity it seemed as if the wind had not been able to uproot this mammoth tree.

"Well, Ray," began Nat, "we ought to have this monster down by sunset, and I reckon we can if we try hard enough.

"But we've got to put our strength to it, for it's not like felling a cherry tree, by any means."

All morning they worked hard at their task, gradually shortening the life of the stately tree. Noon came, and after a slim repast, they resumed their work on the hillside, hoping to complete their work during the latter half of the day.

Thud, thud, thud; came from the ax as it sank into the sappy wood. Soon the aged pine began to quiver and before long it was resting upon the sloping hillside.

"It worked fine," Nat remarked, studying it critically

Nothing but a small conversation went between the two now, and after a few moments they were again bound for home—the little cabin in the dell.

CHAPTER II.

The Unexpected Letter.

The afternoon had been scorching on the heights above, where rocky slope and climbing pines pierce their summits through a veil of white clouds, but the foggy canyon was exceedingly chilly. In these great rifts eternal gloom reigns, and from them soars lingering desolation. All that day humanity had labored strenuously at various tasks, and now gray and solemn shadows were quickly falling, swiftly decreasing the hours of day. Human activities which had rang merrily along these walls, throwing distinct echoes, were now quieted, so quiet, in fact, that it seemed as though the whole world had been deserted.

As the moon rose, however, flooding the surrounding plain with a silver light, in which cactus glittered as if it had been frosted, a dark object appeared, moving cautiously along the summit of one of the small ridges in the immediate vicinity. The object was a human head which seemed to be reconnoitering the situation very carefully. Presently, a second head appeared, and low voices were heard, which if we had been there, we should have recognized as those of Donald Greely and Ralph Fulton, notorious New York swindlers.

"I really do not know for what purpose Bradford wants those papers," Greely admitted. "But I do know he wants them bad—you see this year will mean that he's got to prove to the United States government that the mine belongs to him, or else

fork up part of the claim as homestead land. In a private talk with Bradford I understood that he was a sorter claimant and that by some chance or another he had stumbled into this affair. He's quite tricky, you know, Fulton, and at once laid plans for winning. The real owner is some Charles Henderson, and if I caught it right, I believe Bradford said his son had them now; that is, Henderson's son." He paused, glancing slyly in all directions.

"Where is the kid?"

"Somewhere in Moonstone Valley," was the reply. "About a ten mile crow flight from here. It's a rather hard place to find, so I learned, but as you know there's a big reward, if we bring them safely to Bradford."

"Yes, I understand," Fulton returned, leaning forward toward Greely. "And we'll get 'em, too."

Soon they had kindled a fire, and after mealing, they set off over the rocky mountain roads. However, before they started, Fulton withdrew from his pocket a tiny well-worn map, and kneeling before the flickering light, they studied it with great care.

The dark night wore slowly away, but still dawn would ultimately come, they were quite sure of that, so, with this thought in mind they plodded onward. The warm, comfortable atmosphere of the summer night invigorated them as they followed the shadowy trail. The owl in some nearby tree hooted incessantly her cadences, which made night an un-

expressible loneliness. Down in the deep valley the coyote called dismally her fleeing mate, as he went scrambling over rock and glade in search of fresh meat.

Soon birds began to twitter, and the little frog ceased her continued croaking as it became lighter in the far east.

As soon as it was daylight, Greely resolved to climb one of the highest trees, to take a general view of their whereabouts.

Climbing came exceedingly easy to him, especially as the tree he selected had numerous branches, some growing quite closely to the ground. Once in the top, he was able to see a goodly distance in all directions. Far to his left were gray mountains over which he and his chum had traversed the day before. To the right was a valley, encircled in a cloud of morning fog which had not yet risen. In this valley was situated the cabin for which their eyes were so eager to discover; yet, beyond this, there was a reason of even weightier significance that appealed to them. Seeing nothing else of any importance he concluded to descend from Nature's tower and resume the journey.

By the middle of the forenoon of that day, they spied the cabin, lying deep in a green wooded dell eight hundred feet below the place from where we first met them. Hours passed on.

With an exorbitant amount of smoke rising from the chimney, bestowed that there must be some

one existing in or close by the house at that moment.

"What now?" asked Fulton, amazedly.

"We'll run in the direction where there's the least noise."

They darted off toward the cabin.

"Queer," remarked Nat, from within, "I thought I heard a peculiar noise, but I guess 'twas some toad or something of such a nature."

"I'll make sure, pard," Ray assured, "for no one can be trusted in this 'No Man's Land.'"

"Listen! There it is again—What is it?"

Ray became suddenly interested as he heard the noise, and listening intently, remarked: "Say, that is funny; and hark! There's another off to the north."

The desperadoes were advancing upon the cabin from the rear, both men holding a ready pistol in his hand. They stole toward the hut like so many glittering-eyed devils, positive of victory.

"Go slow, Fulton," came softly from Greely.

Cautiously as the uninvited visitors crept, however, the occasional sharp crack of a twig proclaimed their presence.

"Get out the rifles—bolt the doors!" commanded Ray, sharply, as an unusual heavy thumping was heard on the door.

"Hold on there, or we'll shoot!" yelled Nat, peeping through a crack in the wall.

In answer a bullet whizzed through the door, lodging in the mud-plastered wall on the opposite side of the small room. From that time on, for nearly twenty minutes, a steady ripping of shots were being fired. At last Greely and Fulton were forced to retreat, having run short of ammunition.

"What in the world do you suppose they wanted, Ray?" Nat asked, after they had watched the mysterious men disappear in the thick mountain foliage in the distance.

"I'm sure I don't know," was the puzzled reply.

"Confound the luck! Why didn't you shake a leg when I signaled the first time, you skunk?" stormed Fulton, fretting because of their failure to outwit their opponents.

Greely said nothing, but paced the floor excitedly. Once he stopped and raised his head, but only for a moment, again starting off in that same mood.

"Say, old man," broke out Greely suddenly, "I have an idea. Suppose that I write young Henderson a letter, asking that he meet me as an old friend at Shannon's Bridge to-night. I'll wager we'll get the papers then."

"Hugh! That's simple enough, but are you sure he'll have the deeds with him?"

"Well," thought Greely, "I could introduce myself as old James Morgan, of New York. You know the lawyer was an old friend of the kid's

father, so I reckon that it wouldn't be very hard to get the boy interested."

This, indeed, sounded very logical, so after a little discussion on the matter, Greely decided to write the letter.

It took Greely some time, but at length he completed the letter, and calling Fulton to his side, he read:

"Friend:

"Because I feel it is, nothing less than my duty, I am writing you concerning a matter in which you have unlimited interests.

"It was but three weeks ago that a man by the name of Seymore Bradford, a New York merchant, visited my office on special matters concerning a rich mine out here in the West. A short time ago I learned that you held the deeds, and that you were out here filing government claims.

"Now, that this man means you no actual harm, he intends to seize the papers through some under-handed trickery. My business did not exactly bring me out in these parts for the purpose of looking into your affairs, but the strange man's peculiar attitude toward you and your father led me to believe you were in danger. And it is for this reason that I ask you if I may convey the papers to the Great Atlantic Bank of New York City. If you feel interested meet me to-night at ten o'clock just north of Shannon's Bridge."

"Respectfully yours,

James Morgon, LL.D."

"Well, Fulton," scornfully remarked Greely, as he surveyed the papers, "That'll fool the kid."

Fulton admitted that the plan was actually a good one, and no doubt would work out in their behalf.

They knew that they were taking a great risk to use Morgan's name, but what wouldn't be attempted in a case like this.

As Fulton disappeared in the underbrush of the wilderness, bound for the Henderson homestead, Greely felt fully convinced that their visit to the West had been paid in full. The horse on which the messenger rode was swift—a bony beast of Western breed—who seemed to know the West and its trails almost as well as the old pioneer.

Soon the cabin was sighted, snugly resting in that fertile valley. The little pool rippled crimsonly in the full rays of a setting sun, and the bush and pine cast long, black shadows.

CHAPTER III.

A Ride For The Hills.

"There's one thing I know now, anyhow," muttered Fulton, with some complacency in his mind, "and that is that young Henderson 'll get badly fooled if that other helper of his doesn't show up."

Onward the two pressed.

"Whoa!" shouted the rider to his horse, when they were not over ten yards from the cabin.

As he dismounted from his pony, he realized that he was not to bestow any sign whatever of the battle in the forenoon; but as bold a man as he was, he felt he was taking a great risk, and trembled at the thought.

"I'd like to know if they'll recognize me now?" he asked himself, as he placed a small mustache on his upper lip. "For if they do, I'll be full of bullets before I get back."

The sunlight slanted on his face as he stood there. He held his head down for a moment, as if in thought, and then he raised it, looking out across the bare hills which towered high above him. Night was quickly coming apace and though it was quite light in the valley as yet, the distant foothills had already clad themselves with that sort of inky blackness. Betwixt this shadowy blackness and the nervous desperado, approached a tired piece of humanity.

"Stranger, what be your mission?"

"To speak with Mr. Henderson," Fulton replied, his eyes twitched nervously. "I presume this is the man?"

"Hardly; but I'll call him."

Ray now disappeared from view, entering the cabin. He found Nat busily engaged in preparing their supper. Walking up to the boy, he whispered in his ear: "There's a stranger that wants to speak with you, Nat—better go out an' see."

Henderson looked curious but said nothing. He at once left everything, making his way to the door.

After Fulton had delivered the letter he mounted his bronco. The little animal and his rider were soon once more among the rough, broken ground

and stiff scrub-brush of the upper foothills, leaving Nat and his chum poring interestingly over the paper they had just received. In a clump of greese-wood, Fulton reined his horse to a standstill, and turning himself in the deep saddle, he gazed back at the two far below.

"Well, what's your idea of this letter, Ray?" inquired Nat, looking his chum squarely in the eyes.

"I can't imagine it of very much importance," was the response after a second reading.

"Here is where I strongly disagree with you. I am positively sure that this letter is of unusual importance, so much so that it was brought by special messenger."

"Not that I am here to accuse any person of a crime or anything of the sort, but I sorter believe that that fellow is connected with some kind of a plot; it couldn't be one of those fellows that raided us this morning, could it, Nat?"

"That's what I've been a-thinkin'—but how would he know Lawyer Morgon?"

This was the great question that faced them. It was undoubtedly the most complicated puzzle that had ever confronted them. Deeper and deeper they plunged into its contents, with every nerve alert, until at last they concentrated it to be a subject that would prove nothing but satisfactory.

Night again drew down its gray curtain over the hills and canyons, and the chirping birds now ceased their lull-a-by melodies and twittered tremuously upon their high roosts, while the toad again chuckled her annoying series of musical notes in a conglomerate fashion in some swampy spot in the valley. The red sun, monstrous and perfect in its contour dwelt, as it seemed, for an instant in the far West, ere it sank beneath that dark rim of mountains, beyond where lies the great waters of the Pacific.

Fulton had by this time arrived at his cabin in the foothills and there found Greely pacing nervously up and down the room. His expressions showed plainly that he was full of dismay. Where was Fulton, thought he. Whether he had been caught in his little trick, or whether he had lost courage, Greely did not know? But he did know only too well what it would mean to them had Fulton been so unlucky as not to carry his mission to a successful end.

"My God! If Fulton has failed, no one else will get the blame but me, and—and—I know he'll kill me!" And to that his steps grew longer and faster.

But just then the door opened, and in stepped the man who was causing Greely such anxiety.

"Ah! How did it turn out?" Greely inquired.

"Fine, Greely!"

It was eight by the village clock of Kelso when young Henderson and his partner mounted their

steeds and started toward their destination. A few seconds later, had we been there, we should have observed Greely and Fulton also mounting their horses, under heavy disguise.

"Ray," began Nat, earnestly, after they had journeyed some time in the night of stars and silence, "We had better check our speed and part here, you cross this ravine and meet me at the bridge yonder."

They had planned this departure so as not to create any disturbed suspicion between the swindlers, if that is what they would prove to be, for evidently, if Greely should see the two boys together he would comprehend and thence the whole matter would be upset.

Then there came a sudden interruption that cut their speech short. It was the thump, thump of some discernible person approaching on the bridge below.

"I really believe that is Morgan," was Nat's thought when he came fairly close to the individual.

"Ah! You arrived?" was the fluctuating answer. "Fine evening?"

"Yes; an extremely fine evening."

The clear moonlit night revealed the oval face, the restless eyes, and the long tapering hand which was shoved forward in anticipation of receiving a hearty welcome.

"May I ask if you have the papers in your possession at this moment? If so I should like to glance them over a bit. I think I can see by the light of the moon."

"I have, but I don't think it fair to myself to exercise too much faith in a person I meet at such a time as this, sir," Nat said, strongly. "Nor do I think it much of your affairs to be a-buttin' in my business. You—"

"See here, young man. I don't recognize your right in speaking to me like that! I mean nothing but good, and any person who is so toad-brained as can't see that, there isn't very much chance for him on this earth.

"Now, look here, Henderson, you are right in stating that it's none of my affairs whether you lose those papers or—"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I did not mention the papers, furthermore—"

"Well, but you were referring to them," he returned, mildly. "But I do say, that such a misfortune on your part would not be for the best, and you know it, too, if you'll stop and think. Do you recollect the time when the great Steel Corporation in 18— lost that well known deed to the Minnesota Iron Region, merely through fraud? Well, the time may come when you will experience the very same thing. Now, if I were you, I would listen what my elders had to say, and then act as my own conscience dictated. What do you say, Henderson?"

"You'll not get a smell of the papers until you prove yourself Mr. James Morgan of New York City!"

"Your ways are different from mine, boy," Greely concluded, after which he gave a shrill whistle that echoed and re-echoed in and out the mountain passes. This sudden signal had been planned by Fulton and the man present, in case the latter should be in want of help, should any uprising come about.

At the time of this signal, Fulton was sitting beneath a wide-spreading oak in whose branches hung a savage reptile. Daring not to move and unable to reply, he was forced to remain in the same position. Ray, upon hearing the whistle—which chanced to have been the very same one planned by himself and Nat—set out to rescue his partner.

At the time of Ray's appearance upon the scene, Greely and Nat were engaged in a hot battle. Grunts were heard from them both as they received unbearable blows. They came together like mad dogs, their eyes seemingly glowing with fire in the darkness. Although not visible from where Ray was standing, the men's faces were covered with blood, their shirts ripped, and their hair matted in the thickening stain. Once they clinched, each holding his ground for some considerable time. On and on they fought until at last every bit of strength seemed to leave them, their blood-stained fingers gripping the death grip.

Indeed, it did seem queer that Ray did not interfere, but he knew too much of the West and its laws to part fighting men; he knew what Old Man Lynch promised the man who so did; he knew that

mad mob! Although he did not dare to help Nat, he stood ready to kill Greely, should he win the battle.

Again the men broke—clinchd. Oh, God! How they longed for a grain more of strength; just one! Nat had his fingers about Greely's throat, while the other strove to gain his opponent's. But he couldn't! He strove, tugged, prayed, but in vain! 'Twas like a dream; every movement impossible.

Finally Greely fell from exhaustion, struck the back of his head, and like a flash, all things were wiped from his vision and the few moments came swiftly.

Now Ray stepped up, and carrying Nat in firemen's fashion, they went to where the horses were standing. Ray managed to get his companion on the steed, after which they rode off, disappearing in the dense darkness.

CHAPTER IV.

The Wayside Inn.

"What be that, Ray?" Nat asked, as they made their way out of a deep gully and saw in the far distance a small building towering quite high above the horizon.

"That's the French Inn, 'Egalite.' I move we bunk there for the night; how does that hit you, Nat?"

"It makes no difference to me, but I think it would be some better as we don't want to meet that fellow again. I presume he's not in an unusual good humor. I should give a lot to know if he died after we left."

"I hardly think that, as he was but unconscious."

By this time they had reached the Inn. It was a two-story affair built of the rudest kind of stone and whitewashed. Indeed, it looked shabby, but none the less inviting for that. About the place stood tall pines, their branches furnishing an excellent shade for tourists during the hot portion of the day.

Presently, they rode up to the gate, dismounted their horses and tied them to a tree.

A small, French-bred man met them at the door, and invited them in in his peculiar way, he bade them have lunch. This they did, and after arranging for the night's lodging and breakfast in the morning, they were taken to their room on the second floor.

"Say, Ray," put in Nat after the Frenchman had left them, "This reminds me of our barn back East."

"You're right there kid."

In another hour the homesteaders were wrapped in deep slumber.

Below the boys' apartment something was occurring that neither Ray or Nat were aware of. A conversation was ensuing between the proprietor

and two men. They were exceedingly shabby looking, ugly in spech and sly, but still, however, the little Frenchman seemed to have unusual faith in them, listening intently and answering all questions.

"Did I understand that you said there were two boys lodging here to-night?" inquired Fulton, drawing up the fellow's ear.

"Yez, ziree," was the respond. Zhey are on ze second floor, but I don't ze know where zhey are ze going." And he shrugged his shoulders.

"That doesn't mean anything to us," Fulton whispered back. "All I want to know is if they are armed. Come now, Frenchy, spit out what you've got to say."

"I don't ze know, zer."

"Well, never mind then, but hurry us up to our room. My pard doesn't feel extra good to-night."

"Maybe he gets into ze scrape and got ze licked," and the Frenchman grnned, foolishly.

"D— you! That's none of your business. Come on now, or I'll knock that nanny-goat face of yours clear off your shoulders, do you hear?"

Nothing more was said until they reached the assigned room, and then the fellow left them, stating that breakfast would be ready at seven o'clock.

"I'd give a good bit to know if they have discovered anything yet," observed Fulton. "I wonder how long they have been here."

"They can't have been here so long," put in Greely. "We came here as soon as we were able."

Some minutes fled, after which the men decided their course of action.

"It occurs to me that the best way to get at those deeds would be to enter the room and pocket them," suggested Fulton, after they had learned of the boys' apartment.

It was not long, however, until they were on their mission.

How long the boys had slept they did not know, but all of a sudden Nat awoke with a start not knowing what had awakened him. Ray was sleeping soundly.

"Ray!" he cried softly, but there came no reply.

The room being in semi-darkness, very little of the place could be seen from where the boy lay.

"It's mighty queer what woke me; I usually sleep well." thought he.

He fell back in bed again and tried to sleep, but all was in vain. And though he lay with his eyes closed, sleep was as far from him as it had ever chanced to be before. He shivered but said nothing.

"Can it be the landlord?" he questioned himself, as he heard the lock click. "If it is, what on earth does he want in here at this time of the night?"

The bed in which the boy lay was fixed in such a position that it was quite difficult for him to see

any significant part of the room in his present position. As noiselessly as possible, he changed about until the entire room was within his view. Hardly had he settled in his new place than he beheld two figures cross the doorsill to his left. Then a slight puff of air came in as the door was closed, extinguishing the lamp, leaving them in total darkness.

"My God, can it be Morgan attacking us again?" mused Nat, quiveringly. "No; for he was alone when met at the bridge. Can it be the inn-keeper with him?" This last thought lingered for a little while upon his mind, but soon he dismissed it, too. He became desperate!

"Wake up, Ray," the boy yelled at the top of his lungs. "There's somebody here who doesn't belong here!"

"What's that, man?" Ray returned sleepily.

"Somebody's in this room—there—" But he stopped as he felt the clutch of a hand about his throat.

"You fool! If you utter a word, I'll fill you full of bullets, do you hear?"

"Let go of me! If I ever—" spurted forth Ray from the other side of the room, as he, too, was being assaulted by one of the two arrivals.

Nat, though he had put up a desperate fight, lay now beaten on the tiny cot, his mouth gaged and his hands and feet tied, while both the desperadoes were handling Ray, who yet was able to hold his own.

A few minutes passed, Ray becoming weaker and weaker, finally giving up.

"We're going to get those papers to-night, young man," announced Greely, walking up to Nat.

The boy could not answer.

"Light that lamp and quit foolin' with the kid, Greely," Fulton insinuated. "You'll never get 'em that way."

The person spoken to at once complied to orders, and it was not long after, however, until they found that for which they were searching.

"I say, what iz zis noise. You make worse ze noize zan if a box of fine spaghetti fall to ze floor. This will ze come 'a outrance!"

"Get out of here or I'll make you dance awhile!"

The Frenchman stepped aside, letting Fulton and Greely pass through the door, the men disappearing in the darkness without.

Nervous as was the little fellow, he possessed enough wit about him to investigate as to the boys' situation. It was not long until the boys had made clear their misfortune, been united, and were chasing up the mountain side after the fleeing men.

"Go!" echoed Fulton, putting his heels to his mount.

With their revolvers in hand, the boys rode down the narrow trail toward a rising sun, which was beginning its day's illumination. As they spurred their horses onward over that rough trail, even the

lonely rabbit by the side gave a frightened noise, and bounded off into the dense underbrush. Birds flitted upward, and the tiny snake wriggled to one side lest he should be trampled on. To look upon these two riders as they left the winding trail behind them, would seem to denote that nothing else in the world was yet awake. Presently, they turned round a sharp bend, and was lost from sight.

CHAPTER V.

The Wreck.

"Cut across Leather-Path Canyon, and we'll meet them before they reach Kelso!"

At once the two boys reigned their ponies up the steep trail to their left, the animals clawing briskly at the rocky path. Up the trail they went, for nearly a mile, at length coming to a slight level at the summit of the range. About this level they lingered some little time, scanning the beautiful greenery below.

"I'll be hanged if that isn't the Northern Pacific!" ejaculated Nat, as he saw the great train crawl slowly round the bend to their south. "Let's hop it, Ray.

"My God!" murmured Ray, frantically, "that train's running wild. The engineer is hanging from the cab window now!"

"But where's the fireman?" questioned Nat, as he looked in the direction pointed out by Ray.

Ray did not stop to think, but instantly sprang onto the next car forward, and made his way toward the racing engine. Down the steep and winding track flew the iron horse, breathing furiously as it tossed to and fro. From the open door of the fire-box poured great puffing volumes of smoke, almost blinding the two boys as they climbed from the box car into the tender. Over the coal they sprang, and within a few seconds were within the cab. Everything seemed in a chaos, nothing as it should have been.

The engineer hung from the cab window, a large gash on the forehead. The fireman was missing. Everything as far as the running of condition of the engine was concerned, seemed perfect. There was one thing, however, that actually puzzled the boys, and that was why the engine was now travelling so much faster than it had been when first they beheld it. Indeed, this was a mystery. What could have happened to the man, they did not know nor could they even conjecture the outcome of the affair. Nat at once gripped the throttle, but somehow it did not respond.

"Ray, I think someone's been tamperin' with these—"

"My God, man," burst in Ray, "we can't lose any time—it means life or death!"

Indeed, they were risking their lives. The runaway engine went speeding along that groove in the

mountain without control, sticking to the rails as if glued. Faster and faster it seemed to tear without no limit, without no fear. Several times it seemed to sway too far, but again would bounce back upon the rails.

Although the scene was tragic, it did not take the boys long to decide what they were going to do. They lifted the body of the engineer from the cab window and carried him to the steps of the engine. As carefully as they could they let him down until he almost touched the ground. Then they dropped him, but in such a manner that he fared none the worse for the little fall. He rolled for a few feet, and then to the astonishment of the boys in the cab, he sat up, seemed to scratch his head and for the first time realized what was taking place. The sudden shock which he had received had deprived him of his reasoning, but now a second had miraculously restored his senses. This had but one glorious thought—the engineer had been recalled to life and reason.

A second later Nat spied a long dump of dirt, and almost instantaneously let his body whirl into space. Ray watched his companion's movements, and when he saw Nat rise to his feet and beckon, there seemed to surge through his body a feeling of uncontrollable joy. And, indeed, it seemed as a tonic to his perplexed mind. Then without the least tremor, Ray knelt for one awful moment on the verge of space, put over first one leg and then the other. Al-

most too suddenly he felt the same rush into air that his chum had but a few moments previously experienced; the same grip of unconsciousness while in mid-air. The boy landed half-way down an incline. Unfortunately, Ray had not found such a good place upon which to alight, so with almost dangerous velocity, he went head over heels, slid for ten or twelve feet and then reached the bottom of the embankment.

The boy's head landed squarely against the stump of an old tree, and when two men approached him he was just struggling to a sitting posture, rubbing his head and staring about as if collecting his scattered senses.

"Hello! Who are you?" asked Ray, bewildered, as one of the men gripped him by the shoulder.

"Rather forgetful, Fulton, eh?"

"Just about time that you learn our acquaintance, young man!"

"Not much to learn, Mr. Morgan, since you feel so d— proud of yourself!"

Ray had by this time recalled his missing faculties, and was now almost as witty as his famous New York "lawyer." It was when the boy was about to rise to his feet that Fulton's fist drove forward like a huge cylindric rod of flesh and muscle, catching him squarely under the chin. The terrific concussion of the blow rendered Ray temporarily unconscious.

"Quick, Greely," mumbled Fulton. "Toward Black Eagle Canyon!"

Just then there was a mighty road as the ill-fated engine turned onto a spur, hit the bunting-post at the end, and went headlong down the steep mountain side.

"Ray, where have you been?" asked Nat, excitedly, as he bent over his chum.

"Why, no where—where have you been?"

"Came as fast as I could. You know there's some distance between here, and where I jumped."

"You never jumped, did you, Mr. Henderson?"

"Never mind, Ray, you just lie down here for a few moments, till I fetch some water from the creek."

Soon Nat was on his embassy, taking the trail which led down into regions of rock and brush. After a short time he came to the little watercourse. This little creek gurgled from a mountain spring, and flowed freely over a shelf-like level for some distance. There singing round little boulders, splashing down a little fall, laughed the water. In it swam tiny fish, ducking every once in a while beneath the green, thallus body of *Marchantia*, and other mosses.

After some little difficulty, however, he succeeded in finding a place on the edge of the water-course upon which he could stand while he dipped his sombrero into the water.

Some moments later, when he had arrived at his comrade's side, he chanced to glance up, throwing his eyes in the direction of the canyon, and down against the rocky background, were seen two men. This new discovery enthused him, and rising to his feet, he took a second glance.

"Look, Ray! Yonder; to the base of the canyon. Do you see anyone?"

"By God, I do Nat! And it's the two men that just attacked me!"

"What! Do you mean to say you have met that fellow again? But who's the other one?"

"Never mind who he is! We want 'em both." And to that Ray rose, staggered but caught himself again, and with renewed vigor and strength, he set off after the two specks in the valley, Nat close behind.

Down they went until they reached the elevation which was more like a shelf on the mountainside than anything else, and over which the little creek ran, spurting forth from a cavity in the mountain wall and foaming over a precipitous slab of rock, disappearing in a misty cloud. On this shelf they stopped, looking down in search of the men who they had seen but a few moments previous.

It was nearly a thousand feet down. There was a river meandering through the dense olive-colored wilderness in the far distance. Here and there were foaming rapids, but so remote that they could not be distinguished only that light green hue. The river

was like a heavy and sluggish fluid of inky blackness flowing between the walls. It emerged from an acute bend of a sheer rock, probably ten miles or so away to the northward, disappearing around a bend of another cliff an equal distance to the southward. It was early, however, but still they discerned all this through the gray mist of the morning.

As they turned, once in a while, they perceived the walls, and land above, lighten as the red sun crept farther up into the heavens, at their rear.

"Ray," said Nat, after having scrutinized the scenery, "it seems to me that if we take the Deer Trail we can head them off before they ever reach the top of that wall. What's your idea?"

"I wouldn't be surprised but that you are right, Nat."

And as he swept his eyes out over the land, he seemed to grasp its marvels all at once. On the slope to his right grew monstrous pines, sighing softly in the breeze of the mountain. Looking farther down that seemingly endless groove, off there in the distance rose the mountain to a higher elevation. This sight was one of the many wonderful wonders of the West. Tinted with that ever changing pink, blue, and green; dotted here and there by brownish projecting rocks; adorned by the leaping fall of sparkling water, all together made up the beauty, which so often lures the tenderfoot into its wilds.

Presently, after having located the fleeing men again, the boys set out on the trail mentioned by Nat.

"I'd just like to know where the young rascals are keeping themselves," came from Greely, as the two were climbing rock over rock toward the summit of the wall, in that deep dismal canyon.

"Most likely they've concluded that it's best to leave us have the papers after all," Fulton replied, shrugging his shoulders.

Now the tape-wide trickle of water seen from above, had become a good-sized river of rapids and whirlpools; that one long stretch of black, ugly green had changed into lovely, cool woods, and damp thickets. Great pines furnished the shaded nooks for which a westerner is always in search. In these districts the sun is very rarely seen, but still the bear, the bird, and the fox is as happy as ever.

By this time the boys had arrived at the top. The desperadoes were a hundred feet or more below them, yet the hoarse grumble of their voices were clearly heard.

A few moments later Greely and Fulton were on level ground again, making their way toward Malvern Range in the distance. The boys crouched quietly behind a large bush by the path, and it was when these two men passed by that they sprang upon them. The papers which the New York men were reading with interest dropped unnoticed to the ground. Nat hurriedly picked them up and

rushing away, he reappeared behind a cluster of dense foliage. Presently, he was back again, and to his astonishment found poor Ray lying upon the ground in a semi-unconscious condition.

"They've—they've gone, Nat," was Ray's first words.

"But not with the papers, old boy," Nat responded, happily.

The men had fled after they had overpowered Ray, thinking it for their best that they go while chances were good.

CHAPTER VI.

The Confession.

"Fulton," said Greely, after they had despatched a hearty out-door meal, "We sure did a fine job in holding those papers,"—

Low mumbling voices were heard! A thud of footsteps echoed from around the bend in the road.

"But what?" asked Fulton, anxiously glancing in all directions.

Greely did not answer.

Louder and louder the sound became, until at length Fulton became aware of some person or persons approaching.

"Look yonder!" Greely at last ordered. "For heaven's sake let's make for that hill up there."

"Why, man." burst out Fulton, "They see us!"

And so the boys did; for, at once they gave chase, again their thoughts clear, and fighting spirit renewed.

The hill toward where the desperadoes were fleeing was quite thickly covered with pines and bushes,—pines ten and twelve feet through, so huge that one could hardly look over one of their prostrate trunks even from the back of the pony. About some of these trees a certain parasitic moss girdled their trunks. The color of this peculiar moss was of a brilliant yellow-green. The shape was krinkly and curly, nevertheless, it was dry and exceedingly brittle. It formed in inch-wide parallel bands, a foot or so apart. It twined higher and higher until some sundry branch was reached; then it proceeded to conceal that. The somberest shadows of the arriving twilight was always lighted by the vivid yellow-green moss.

Presidently, after Greely and Fulton had picked their way through this wilderness of debris, they came upon an almost vertical wall, and here they stopped. Were they now doomed? Would Henderson and his companion overtake them before they would find some means of escape? These questions confronted them with no little bearing, yet they again started, this time making their way along a path that circled round the high rock, but which seemed to become narrower as they continued.

"Fulton, you don't mean to continue on a path like this, do you?" asked Greely, as his friend picked the way.

"I'll admit it's rather dangerous, but, pard, we've got to do it."

They had not gone more than fifty feet when they came to the end of the path which led in the loose dirt. The last two hundred feet of the path had been nothing more than a loose, shaly bottom, such a bed of rock as would be found where sea water had once been. The tremendous granite slides, where thousands of tons of rock fragments had avalanched and covered the once-laid trail of the sixties, are still to be seen, and truly these trails discourage man and beast.

"A cave! What luck!" shouted Greely, as they confronted an opening over six feet square. The entrance was covered by a dainty growth of vine and moss, which gave to the air a peculiar odor and dampness. At once they decided to enter.

The descent into the cave was a gradual one for over forty or fifty feet. Beyond this, the cavern broadened out and became much higher. Overhead hung colored stalactites of genuine lime rock, tinged with other minerals which lay hidden in this mountain.

On and on the two went, over a dark ugly flooring of stone, reeking with wet and slimy moss. By this time the homesteaders had found tracks in the loose shale outside, and were tracing them up the mound before the cave entrance.

Presently, the boys arrived at the entrance, and without once discussing their dislike of entering the cavern, they pushed forward. Though they were somewhat accustomed to caves of this sort, they proceeded with great care, especially as they wanted to avoid even the semblance of further mishaps.

"Great Caesar! What a cave!" exclaimed Fulton, after they had continued for some little distance.

"I agree," responded Greely. "But do you think they are following us?"

"I doubt it."

"Well, I consider your doubting very witless; for we're here to take care of you fellows right now!" interrupted Nat, as the boys ran upon the men.

"What the—"

"Never worry. You're in good care," Nat announced.

Nat felt, for the first time now, that the use of a revolver was absolutely necessary, so he withdrew the pistol, commanding them to raise their hands.

"Make an outcry, and you'll be sorry for it."

"I demand to know for what reason you fellows are handling us like this?"

"I really do feel sorry that you men are so ignorant of this matter," said Nat with a peculiar grin on his face.

"We demand to know!"

The boys refused to talk further with them, demanding them to retrace their footsteps back to the entrance of the cave.

Outside the cave they halted.

"Now, see here, we brought you skunks here to get some information; and expect to get straightforward, intelligent answers, do you understand?"

"Exactly; but you shall learn nothing from me," responded Fulton.

"Nor I," went on Greely.

"Perhaps we shall."

"I don't think so," Fulton said, with determination.

"Do you fellows acknowledge the fact that you're entirely under our control?"

"Yes; but that is no reason why we are to tell all we know!"

"Immediately tell us what your objects are in trying to get possession of the papers, which are now, of course, in our holding."

This instantly aroused the two men under guard, as they still thought they had the deeds, and without mental control, Greely began searching his pockets.

"Er—er— we've never had or seen the papers mentioned, sir," and turning toward his crony, grinned, saying:—"Sorry we're in the presence of such ill-characters as these, pard, but I guess Fate has decided to tickle us a bit. This also is quite a joke, eh?"

"Quite serious from our standpoint, therefore, we'd like to have an answer right now!"

This time Nat possessed sufficient determination, both in eye and speech as to produce a feeling within Greely's and Fulton's hearts that was far from being pleasant. At last they became aware of the fact that they were no longer being played with as mere children; arguing like children. Still they did argue, one disputing the other's word, until at length Greely and Fulton were made to state their story as it had been arranged.

"—and it was when your father was camping out near Lake Bristol eighteen years ago that he was unexpectedly attacked one night, and murdered before he really comprehended what had even happened. At the time I was employed as stenographer at Lawyer Morgan's office, and when you brought the papers up to him for examination and corrections, I at once remembered that this man, Bradford, was willing to pay a high price for the deliverance of these very documents.

"Now, from that time until this I and my partner, who I later received as my assistant, have been trying to get hold of them, but seemingly I have not been able to locate you until recently; even then luck would refuse to come our way, but—"

"Is that the man that was my father's partner up in the Youkon country; he who played friend for over ten long years? The man that lured father

into destruction, and later tried to swindle from him the tiny fortune he did find in late years? God! Let destruction fall upon him!

"Where is this Bradfod now?" asked Ray of Greely.

"I reckon he's still in New York."

"I demand you under law to accompany us to the place, and unless you do, we'll have you strung to the highest desert tree around here, do you understand?"

He did!

This was agreed to and there the conversation was brought to a close, and the boys, replacing their revolvers, started back with the other men to the boys' cabin. For quite a while they traveled the trail. 'Twas nearly six o'clock when they turned into a field that stretched up to one side of the cabin and through this they went, presently arriving at the little shack.

CHAPTER VII.

On An Important Mission.

"Well, I guess we'll start in the morning," announced Nat, after they had finished a wholesome supper.

No one in the group answered to this, but the nod of the head was sufficient to show that they heard, and the wink of the eye, and smile on the face was also enough to describe their happiness.

An hour later they 'turned in.' As the men laid there each in his little bunk, the flickering light from the fireplace lit the walls and ceiling, picturing mysterious shadows gone by. It was rather still on the interior of the hut, the only noise being the crackling of the burning wood in the fireplace, while, from without, came the prolonged barking and howling of some famished wolf, as he prowled sneakily about. This noise actually annoyed Greely and Fulton, but to the boys it was filled with that sort of wild spirit, which had always made them enjoy the West and its ways. While in the midst of briefly collecting the plans of the coming day, Nat followed the others into Napland.

The excitement of the coming day made them wake early, and within two hours after they had 'reported,' they were ready for the journey.

"Well, gents," Nat said, as Ray came up to them with the horses, two of the beasts having returned after they had been left back on the range early that morning. "I guess we're off."

The bronchos moved off at a fair gait. They had been subdued by recent experiences, and perhaps, they realized, too, that their riders were leaving the land of bears and wolves on their way to civilization. The riders turned once in the saddle, looking back at the little cabin. Presently, they turned into a side trail and the hut was lost from sight.

"What time be it, son?" questioned Fulton of Nat.

"Ten," was the curt reply.

* * * * *

Soon they arrived at the station. They all secured their tickets, after which they turned over their horses to Deacon Bushnal of Kelso, who had promised to care for them until the boys should return again.

"I reckon we'll be back in a few weeks, sir."

"All right, boys, I'll do my part."

Thereupon they left.

It was just as they ascended the platform of the station, that the Northern express rolled up. The big locomotive seemed rather proud of its strength, and with sudden growls and snarls of steam it protested at being stopped; but nevertheless the great iron-horse was slowing down when it passed the station. Slower still the coaches went by.

After the passengers had alighted, the four of our acquaintances boarded.

"Al-l- a-b-o-a-r-d!" came from the hoarse conductor, as he waved his hand, signaling the engineer.

His resonant voice echoed down the train, and then with a powerful puff from the engine, the wheels again revolved. The porter holding a tip in his fingers, leaped back into the platform of his coach.

"Here she goes, boys!" Fulton chuckled, as the train gathered momentum.

* * * * *

"Greely," spoke Nat, as they rounded a corner and stood before Bradford's house in New York, "You had better speak with the fellow first and get all you can out of him; then we'll enter in five or ten minutes later."

"Very well, sir."

Thereupon he left the little group, walked up the steps and knocked on the door. The boys and Fulton went in search of an officer. In a little while, however, they were again back, this time meeting Bradford and Greely as they were coming onto the street.

"Good morning, Mr. Bradford!" vociferated Fulton, pretendingingly.

"Well, you here, too?"

"It looks very much so, doesn't it?"

Almost instantaneously Nat, Ray and two officers stepped up, surrounding Bradford. The latter lost practically all his senses for a few moments.

"Ah, strangers, wish to see a gentleman or just looking for trouble?"

"Neither; but we are looking for a cur they call Bradford!" Nat whispered with emphasis, his eyes meeting Bradford's squarely. "I presume you're the person—if so we are ready to speak with you on private matters."

"Ha, ha—this really is a practical joke," said Bradford, sneakily, positive that Greely and Fulton were his friends.

"You —— fool, you lie faster than you can run!"

"Kindly come inside, and I'll be more than glad to speak with you fellows." And he turned.

"Now, what have you to say?" asked Bradford, after they had entered.

"To me, it seems absolutely unnecessary that I state my errand, but as I am speaking to you, I reckon it's my duty. Well, in the first place, I want you to tell us your reason for having had my father murdered, and I want an answer mighty quick, too!"

"Oh, my, man," Bradford said, then. "You fellows are actually off your track! I don't know your father!"

"What!" ejaculated Greely, rising from a chair in which he had been sitting. "Don't I well remember the day you sent Fulton and I out to find this young man's father, and murder him if chances were all in course? Answer me!"

Bradford rose, too, springing toward Greely as if mad.

"I'll learn you to give away my——"

"Hold on here, now, Bradford!" called out one of the policemen, as he drew his revolver, "You had better come with us."

Mr. Bradford was handcuffed and led out of the shack, bound for a better abode.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Boys Find Trouble.

Later, Bradford was brought to the police station, and placed under strict care of government authorities at Sing Sing.

The four men remained in the city for a week, taking in all the sights of a city. Then Greely and Fulton returned to Kelso with the boys.

* * * * *

"Kelso! Kelso!"

The trainman began hoarsely shouting the name of the Idaho town. Swiftly, the long dust-covered train rolled imposingly into Kelso, very swift, in fact, as if it did not wish to tarry long in that God-forsaken place. Presently, the brakes ground down to a delicate squeaking.

"Back again, boys!" shouted Fulton, as he stuck out his head from the window. The train was momentarily decreasing in speed, but his eye caught nothing more suggestive than that which was there before their leaving. Then the veteran conductor passed by, going toward the front of the coach.

* * * * *

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

A neatly dressed, fine-looking man, a tenderfoot apparently, plumped squarely down upon his knees in the thick, white dust, with his hands clasped in

entreaty above his head. Above him stood a figure of the man who had so suddenly emerged from the saloon door. A crowd stood some distance off watching the affair. Presently, a girl of about twenty, ran quickly up to the swarthy Mexican, and with a hysteric aspect, gurgled out a few pleading words: "Please, Mr., don't shoot dad—I'll give—"

The tormentor proved to be a dark, ugly man, crowned with a silver-braded sombrero, the huge brim partly concealing the ignorant, brutish details of a full-blooded Mexican.

"Well, I'll be danged, if it isn't that little professor of Harvard!" cried Nat, as he ran up and joined the enthusiastical crowd, later pushing his way to the side of the two men, and the pleading girl. "And, by George, if it isn't Gladys, too! Why where in the world did you—"

"What're you here for, you d— tenderfoots?" demanded the Spanish-American, angrily. "Run along before you get hurt."

Then the Mexican turned toward Brandom again and ordered him to kneel for the second time. This made Gladys utterly useless, even to herself. She turned pale, and while in the act of fainting, her sister rushed to her side. "Oh, Marcella, will he shoot papa?"

"Don't do it, old boy," cried Nat to the professor.

"HE will or YOU will!" thundered the Mexican in fitful anger.

The latter raised his pistol menacingly. But at the same instant a foot projected between the Mexican's legs. The gaudily garbed bully fell to the ground cursing.

"Good boy, Ray," muttered Nat, as he saw his partner act.

The bully crawled off to one side and threw an ugly glance at Ray, at the same time reminding: "I'll show you what Garcia Trouja can do! He never forgets an insult, nor forgives an injury!"

At that the Mexican slunk back of some bushes along the road, and was lost from sight.

"Where on earth did you spring in from, Mr. Brandom, and I see you brought the girls with you, that—"

"Oh, yes," he answered shakingly. "When they heard you fellows were out here, I had no rest till I consented that they might come along. But, say, Nat, don't you think that fellow was kind of ugly toward me?"

"That's the nature of the brute, he treats all alike."

By this time Gladys was feeling a bit better, and though quite weak yet, she tried her best to get to her father's side.

"Nathan, I don't know what I'll ever be able to do to repay you for what you have done for us this day. Papa is—"

"I did such an insignificant part—you had better hand Ray about a teaspoonful of that 'hero-salve,'

I know he deserves it," suggested Nat. "At any rate, how about spending a few days at our cabin, while you're out in these parts?"

"Oh, papa—" began Gladys, excitedly.

"Yes, we surely appreciate the invitation and should love to spend a few days with you, but I have some business to attend to near Salt Bed and White Rock. Perhaps after this appointment, we may see our way clear to run up in these parts."

Just then the eastbound express rolled in, and with a steady and polite gesture of his tiny hand the professor and the girls bade the boys farewell. The boys stood watching them leave, board the train, and even beheld them as they waved from the train window.

A few minutes later found the boys on their way home. During these few moments of excitement with the Mexican the New York men had been sent for the horses, which, as my readers will remember had been left at Deacon Bushnal's place when the boys had left for the city. Now all four were again together, winding the trail back to the homestead over the ridge.

"Let's leave the creek here and turn northward," suggested Nat.

"Kiddie, you have got some sense, all right," approved Ray. "I guess that is the best thing to do. Anyhow, we've gone in this direction as far as we want to, and it's time we were heading direct for home."

Home!—Never before had the world held such a sweet sound, so pure and sweet for the boys as in this case.

Presently, they neared the weather-beaten hut, and with a joyous motioning gesture of Nat's hand, he lifted his hat, waved it high in the air, and with a turgid shout, he broke the silence. They all seemed to possess the same feeling, and with a gay heart each one kicked his horse's sides, they rode onward toward the cabin.

"Whoa! Whoa, boy!"

They dismounted and removing the horses' saddles, they turned them down the back lane, and frolicsomenely the beasts raced toward the corral, a big enclosure, about an acre in extent, in the center of which was a fenced haystack.

After making a scanty, but appitizing, meal, Nat began a peculiar discussion on a subject never before mentioned. For a long time prior to his speaking, he had sat in thought amid the remainder of the group.

"Boys,—I've been a-thinkin' ever since we started for New York, about a certain thing, which, I'm sure will interest you all, and that is, I think you two men capable of staying this government contract out—this homestead deal I mean—while my chum and I go to Nevada where our gold mine is. There I expect to start the mine up again, and when we come home with a fortune, part of it belongs to you men," lastly referring to the New York men.

The plan actually came to pass in the coming few months, and on they went to meet failure or success!

CHAPTER IX.

The Escape From Prison.

"Who might it be?" questioned a man with great anxiety in the farthest corner of a little dingy cell.

"Perhaps it's the guard bringing us food," returned a well known voice.

But was it? Surely no man of such a high standing as guard would think of passing in such fashion through the corridor at this time of the day. Ah! No—this person was evidently up to some mischief. The men within the cell advanced toward the barred door with caution, never turning their eyes from the black shapeless thing on the exterior. Who could it be? They continued to watch the moving figure, striving in vain to distinguish the particular one whose mysterious actions had lured them thither.

"Had we better warn the jailor, Bradford?" suddenly spoke out the new acquaintance.

"By God, you shan't!" came the answer from the shadow on the exterior. "I've gotten this far—don't spill the chance!"

To this Bradford became intensely interested. Then the shadow drew close to the door, and gripping the bars, raised himself to Bradford's ear, and spake:

"I'll help you if you'll only keep quiet!" And to that he fumbled a tiny, well-polished instrument to the man within.

Bradford and Connels, his cellmate, lost no time in gaining the window, and though the light of day was unusually poor, they soon understood the usage of the contrivance which they now possessed. Bradford's perplexed face instantly brightened, and after a short pause, he managed to collect his thoughts, which for the past few moments, had fairly gone astray. He hesitated, his face full of bewilderment.

"Look out the window and tell me if you see anyone in sight, Dave," the murderer ordered sternly.

"I discern a guard near the fence and another one off to the north."

"Then what chance have we to escape, even if this saw happens to be in our possession?"

"Why, man!" suggested Connels, rather ugly, "There's scores of possibilities after dark."

Into Bradford's eyes then came a gleam of satisfaction.

Two hours later the men were sitting on the hard steel couch opposite the tiny window, thinking. The descending sun was pouring a flood of gold over the

smooth floor. The nooks of this diffusive city were darkening quite rapidly. Beyond the Mississippian Divide the sun was yet shining its golden rays terrorizing some object on that endless, God-forsaken desert. Soon, there, too, the red of the western horizon grew pale, changing to a cold thin gray which blended into a darkness too dense for the naked eye.

There was, however, considerable tramping outside, for the prisoners of a safer reputation had been granted a parole and were just returning after a day of labor in the 'yard.' They were haggard and worn, miserable and discouraged; nothing seemed inviting to them.

An hour dragged slowly on, and within a few moments Bradford and Connells took places at the window. Everything on the outside was dark now and not a moving figure save the ever-present guard, who passed beneath the window every now and then. Silence and that dreadful loneliness brooded everywhere, with not so much as a breath of air whistling in through the window.

"Move lively now, lad," spoke Bradford. "And when I say 'move' don't hesitate."

The speaker drew from his pocket the small saw and put it in use. The delicate 'buzz-z-z-z' came so smooth and faint that only those within twenty feet could perceive its meaning. The hole was barred by half a dozen rusty iron sticks set firmly in

mortar and other substances which were decidedly secure.

The early advancement of their task came slow and cautious, as they never knew what moment a guard or other officer might step up. This proved an awful nervous strain on both, but, still the thought of freedom aroused them to a state, which, by gun or knife, could not have stopped prisoners in their situation.

After ten minutes of steady sawing and twisting, the men had succeeded in removing four bars, thus affording an opening large enough to permit the passage of a man's body.

"Now we're off," was the whisper.

Bradford pulled himself up to the sill, turned and dropped outside. All seemed deserted about the place, so, he gave the promised whistle. Instantly Connells' head appeared, then his body, and after a quick glance he, too, followed. There was a muffled grunt as he landed beside his cell-mate, but without once discussing their predicament, they made for the high fence to the right. The night was dark and picking their way through unknown paths was quite an affair. Once Connells fell, twisting his ankle, which, leaving him slightly in the rear, made the gloom of night seem greater to him.

Luck evidently swung toward the fleeing men, for, just as they had cleared away the last bar of the four, some fifteen minutes previous, the dark

guard had turned in persuit of the man from whom Bradford had received the tool, late that afternoon.

* * * * *

This man, Nixon, who for sixteen years, had been a permanent prisoner with the charge of murder against him, had found it exceedingly difficult to discover egress from this black, disagreeable hall.

"I shall conceal myself here, till the keeper chances to pass," he had murmured to himself, as he crouched comfortably in a dark corner. "Perhaps he'll open the door for 'a superior.' "

The hours which had floated on had found him still in the corner nodding sleepily. Soon there came a noise—a thump,—thump,—thump. Just then Bradford and Connels were making their escape, while Nixon lingered between life and death. The latter became impatient—probably too impatient, for, while the man in the blue shirt slipped by, Nixon had risen, at once revealing his presence. With a tigar-like leap he was upon the officer, placing one hand over the other's mouth and the other about his throat. Then tripping the keeper, they fell heavily to the floor.

"Silence or your life!" said Nixon, and the fellow heeded, for he never uttered a word.

All this had happened in a minute, and in another minute the murderer was on his way to freedom. The figure never once stopped after that while

within the prison's boundary, for, luckily, the night being cloudy, furnished gloomy background for the fleeing man. On he went, leaving the iron-gray building behind. Where his destination was, he knew not—nor did that bother him to any great extent, his main object being to escape.

"Hi, there!" rang out a voice in the darkness. "A prisoner has broke—he's headin' West!"

It was this shout which had called Maxwell from his post—only to make the path to freedom more translucent for Bradford and Connels.

* * * * *

"We've got to beat it now!" whispered Dave.

"Where to?" gasped the other, for climbing the tall fence had deprived him of his wind.

"Any direction—only, let's get out of this hole."

Freedom was now within their clutches, but were they able to retain it? Down a long irregular street they fled, entering an alley and were soon lost from sight.

"Do you suppose they are following us?" asked Dave Connels, with some anxiety.

"Perhaps," was the brief answer.

A light drizzly rain was now falling, and the shiny pavements glistened, making the gliding vehicles but a mere part of a common spectacle. The lights on the corners threw peculiar gleams on the street below. For some hours they roamed about the metropolis, hoping to find someone from whom

reliable information could be acquired. But no one revealed themselves. During these few hours which had passed they had succeeded in obtaining each a suit of clothes from one of Connells' friends, so now they pushed onward, more steadily in walk and thought. Suddenly they passed into a side street, and were again lost from sight amid the darkness.

"We must be in the vicinity of the West Shore Railway," proclaimed one of the men in a low voice.

"That's exactly my idea."

"Well," returned Bradford, "I don't directly fancy this city as an ideal hiding place, and to my conception, I feel rather impulsed to advise you that we had better part, or if you will consider my plan, we must both leave the city this very night, for undoubtedly by morning all policemen in New York will be on the lookout for us."

"But where are we to go?"

"I shall—what's that?" questioned Bradford, tugging at his companion's sleeve.

Soon he beheld a locomotive glide by, intercepting the long black avenue. Its headlight shone brilliantly ahead, producing that radiant light, which many times has confused objects in its path. Without the least hesitation the men made for the slow-moving train, which crept toward some distant Western town.

CHAPTER X.

The Robbery at "Kiwatchee Canyon."

Night shadows had fallen; the men of the "Gold Dust Mine" regions were slowly returning to their homes. Work in those parts was prosperous at this time; at least, the number of camps in the foothills showed it, for, smoke was rising from nearly every smoke stack visible. Men and their families from every state in the union were there, shouldering the pick and the shovel. Here and there, small shanties with their purple background of the rolling mountain, revealed themselves to the eyes of men to whom the field-glass was sharing an important part.

There was one particular concern in the mining vicinity, now, to whom more than little appreciation was being rendered. Affairs of the past had been handled with such slovenliness that modern conveniences had never found way to this newly discovered world of barren, desolate plains, until these late arrivals came to rearrange matters as they should have been under former managers. It was the Shawville & Lost River Gold Mine of the Gold Dust district in Elko County. Just south of the camp ran the well known divide between the Great Basin of the waters of the Columbia, and on the north, the mining town, White Rock, spread its shabby dullness under the gray twilight.

White Rock, similar to nearly all mining towns of its size and class, was unusually dull during the hours of daylight, but soon after darkness fell this solemnity seemed to die away, for when the scattered miners came swarming out from nearby hills, clustering in throngs about saloon doors, there rose from the town a multitude of various characteristics from a sea of stagnant scum.

The Shawville & Lost River Mine ran for approximately three-quarters of a mile into Mount Kellen, whose summit terminated some six to eight thousand feet above the level of the sea. At the entrance of the shaft stood the cage, a mighty contrivance applied only when something was to be hoisted or lowered from the mouth to the lower channels. The whim stood directly to the left. From this, extended a chute, running out over one hundred yards beyond the entrance. This was supported by great upright beams, which at the end of the track rose to an elevation of fifty to sixty feet above the sloping hillside. The drift itself was a dark underground passage, through which pierced the small steel cars on their way to the dump. Firm lagging concealed the sides, while at the base of the cribbing lay the sluice filled with torpid water.

A month had passed since the meeting with the professor and his daughters at the railway station, but that time had been long since forgotten. The evening before, the old stage, No. 4, had brought

to this little God-forsaken place these three strangers—strangers at least to White Rock. They were guests at the Henderson cabin, and that evening while the professor was out in the clearing doing some work pertaining to his laboratory for the coming year, the young folks decided to wend their way toward White Rock to spend the evening at the Golden Nugget.

It might be well to here inform the reader that while the boys were attending Harvard their acquaintance with the girls had become rather formal. Many times Nat and Ray both had thought of proposing but never had they plucked up enough courage to present the question. Now, however, events had so occurred as to warrant a few moments at least for a quiet talk, so now we meet them along the road, of course, in no great hurry to reach White Rock.

"Yes, but—er—er"

"Yes, don't you know, it reminds me so much of the days when we strolled on that beautiful campus back—"

"But, Marcella, I say—er—er—will you—"

"No, I don't think it would be fair to leave Nathan and Gladys behind in this awful dark and lonely place. I know Gladys would be frightened to death. I—"

"No, no; I mean, my little girl, will—will—you marry me?"

"Why, Raymond, I would if I were a minister, but now you'll have to go elsewhere." was the girl's witty reply.

"I mean," he said simply, "will you be my wife?"

"Oh, oh!" she blurted out, "I have thought some of that myself, but—but of course, I have to ask papa."

Ray felt the little throb, the tremulous emotion pulling gently at that cord somewhere within his breast. He really wanted to laugh, cry—everything, but he remembered that Nat and Gladys were not far behind, so he let the conversation on this subject drop right here. Presently, they heard a mumbling from the black distance at their rear.

"Come, little girl," broke in Ray softly, "Let's get behind this tree, and evesdrop on that chum of mine—I've an idea they're up to something, too."

"Why,—why, Nathan, you seem to daze me—although, you did so much for us the other day, I almost feel it my duty to grant your desire, if I may call it so, but I must ask dad first, you know, but I'm—"

"Yes, and I'd do it over again if Garcia were here!" he snapped, for his love for the Mexican was not any too great.

By this time they were beyond hearing, so Ray and Marcella returned to the road, both with broad smiles on their faces.

"It looks like they're in for business, alright. I only wish we were."

"We are, Ray," she interrupted, quickly. "You're too pessimistic."

At length they arrived at the little western town of White Rock, nestled snugly under a blue heaven of twinkling stars. Although, night shadows hung low over the town, tumultuous merriment reigned unmastered. From the many small shacks streamed forth that little flickering light of the oil lamp through the unglazed window. In fact, that little town was at its best that night, the stream of life flowing too freely. Everyone seemed to be doing something. Though everything seemed wicked, there was one place, at least, where the tenderfoot could assure himself of a bit of safety, and that was within the walls of the Golden Nugget. Of course, the card room and bar room was there, too, but one must remember that that is an understood fact in the west.

"What's on ter night, Red?" came from an old plainsman, who had ventured into town.

"Nothin' much," was the return. "'Cept over at the Nugget, they're recitin' thet robbery thet was pulled off at Kowatchee Canyon early this morning, and I dare say thet—"

"By God, man! You don't mean Jerry's stage from Mountain City, do you?" gasped the old man, staggering. "I had a wallet containing fifty thousand dollars in Jerry's care!"

"And you came in ter get it to-night?"

"Why, yes!"

"Well, I'm afraid you'll not get that money back unless you pin the bandits to a tree and pocket the gold yourself."

"—and what happened to Jerry?"

The other shook his head, afraid to reply.

"Speak, you hound! Where is he?"

"Sam, I reckon he must have been murdered," began the man, "for the hosses returned without their jehu, and under the seat was a note thet—"

But he did not get to finish, for the old plainsman, Sam Butler by name, was too violent to absorb all this news, not knowing whether it was coming from a reliable source or not. Without the least sign of farewell, he had hurried off to the Golden Nugget. It had been a marvelous change to Butler. Soon he reached the Golden Nugget, and swinging up the wooden steps, he entered. At one end of the long room sat the boys with Gladys and Marcella at their sides. Butler at once directed his footsteps toward this little group.

"Evening, boys—" began Butler, trying in vain to remain as cool as possible.

"Hello, Butler," was the reply, as Nathan rose from his chair. "Meet our old school pals, Miss Gladys and Miss Marcella Brandon, Mr. Sam Butler."

"Ah—er—very glad ter have met you," the old man gurgled out. "But, boys, is it true that old Jerry's stage was robbed this morning?"

"I'm afraid it is," returned the boy, slowly.

"My God! Then I've been robbed!"

"Robbed?" questioned Nat, leaning hysterically over the table, and peering squarely into the old man's eyes.

He did not answer, for just then the little professor stepped in the door. At once he was in the midst of the little crowd.

After things became quiet again, Sam told the whole story under frequent questioning. Never before had they heard of such a large amount of money being stolen from a westerner; never had they understood that such an immense amount of money had ever been possessed by a plainsman of the west.

"Have a drink, gentlemen!" the old man ended, his fist crashing the table as he called the bartender.

At once he received the bottle, and in a few minutes had gulped it down. Presently, his head began to sway, his eyes dream, and before long his head was hidden in his arms on the table. There he lay sodden in a stupor, his thoughts soaring like a flake in a blizzard; his dreams of wealth were gone.

The little group with whom Sam Butler had been talking only a few moments previous were now enjoying a game of Parchesi at one of the tables farther down the long asile.

Butler must have slept for some time, for when he did awaken the hour was nearly eleven. Two strangers sat beside him eyeing him intensely when he raised his head. The one to his right was a man of brutish features, white glowing teeth, yellowish skin, and a pair of black piercing eyes. The other individual possessed keener characteristics, yet, from the viewpoint of hilarity they were both very well matched. One, probably, had underwent a more severe discipline, and accordingly attained a higher standard, but still they owned a mysterious past, that much was evident from their appearance.

"A game—what do you say?" proclaimed the man on his right.

Then, the slight expression of astonishment faded from Butler's eyes. Something which had hidden itself behind the curtain of sleep, came suddenly back to haunt him, the thought of having lost all his money.

"No, boys," he managed to say. "I've been robbed—robbed of all that I possessed in the world."

"Huh, don't quite understand," said the man to his right. "I reckon it wouldn't hurt you much to explain, would it?"

"Well," began Sam, "To start the story is not so hard, but the finish is a mystery to me. You see, I was once a New York broker, and possessed with all luxuries that money could buy. I was a man of unusual snappy standing 'mongst my fellow-

men, and stood quite high in society. This sort of life I continued for many years, until at last my health failed me, and I was compelled to seek Western climates. Those day, boys, were of the best, for already I was fairly off, owner of some sixty thousand of dollars in clear silver." Then Butler stopped, his eyes staring at some invisible object, his fingers tapping the table nervously, and he gulped down something which seemed threatening to choke him. "At the time of my leaving New York, it had not occurred to me that withdrawing the money from the bank had been necessary in my case, so just the other week a proposition confronted me, requiring an enormous amount of money, and it was for this reason that I relinquished my share from the New York bank. A man by the name of Pearsons was chosen to convey the packet of bills to Mountain City, and from there old Jerry Munson, the stage pilot, was to take it." By this time his eyes were set, his outstretched hands clinching the edge of the table, and his jaws moving spasmodically. "Well, old Munson never showed up, and I've heard from several that he was murdered, and my money stolen, but I—"

"Now, see here, old man," burst in one of the men, "We're not here to discuss your affairs, and if you can't give us a game, we'll have to be on our way."

"D— you, nobody's asking you to listen, are they?"

"Well, what do you say?" reminded the other.
"Are you in for a game?"

"Let's go. What limit?"

"As to yours?"

"Fifty dollars to start with."

Butler ran the cards carelessly through his large fingers, staring squarely into his opponents' eyes. There sat the three men all of whom were sharing their tiny fortunes with magnificent Fate. The game started, each one awaiting his turn to slap the card that would bring the sublime heap to him.

"Good God, man! What's that you're doin' under the table?" And Butler drew his revolver.

"None of that in here, now, Butler," roared the bar-tender, as he saw the old man whip out the weapon. "I'll be danged if I'm going to have a man killed in this joint."

"Nor is a cheat going to get the very last red copper I've got, either," he thundered back.

This little excitement had drawn the crowd to this particular table, and as usual Nat and Ray were there to give assistance. The girls and the Professor stood frightened in one corner when the boys came back, and from that time on that interesting game of Parchesi was left unfinished. It was not long, however, before the Professor and his daughters left for the Henderson cabin, while the two boys remained to see the fun out. The Professor was a trifle doubtful as to the road, but he decided to find his way as best he could. Though

the Professor was a small man, the girls felt very confident in his ability of caring for them, even if necessity should arise to warrant the play of a gun.

The long hours seemed like days to the three men who dealt the cards with cautiousness. The stakes gradually increased in value until at length Butler was worth some ten thousand of dollars. A cunning smile crept over Sam's face as he beheld the size of the rolls which were so gaudily displayed by the strangers. He now felt sure that his money was returning. Was it? Presently, the stakes flew up another notch. But now the two strangers sobered. Their hands moved mechanically, their eyes never once glanced at the crowd which stood over them. What awful moments of strain. Again it was Butler's turn to play—his last card—but, was he prepared? They knew only too well that his move would tell the tale. One—two—three. He moved!

"Gentlemen!" spoke Sam. "I regret to announce that you lose—" And to that the old man rose.

Then in an instant one of the men rose, pulled his black revolver, and backed up to the door.

"Come, pard," he growled, "Let's see how much of that gold you can clear up!"

It was not long, however, before the strangers were gone, gone in a solid mass of blackness outside. The White Rock men poured from the saloon, and they, too, seizing their ponies, circled round until they hit the trail over which the unknown men were making their escape.

Though Nat and his chum had come to town without the horses, they had been successful enough to secure the bartender's two black mares, and it was when they were dashing down the narrow trail on the outskirts of the town that Nat broke out: "Boys, if we hit this trail good and hard, we'll reach the rim of the desert before those black devils!"

And thus it was that the strangers left the little mining town of White Rock to live or to die.

CHAPTER XI.

The Strangers' Identification.

The heavens lightened as the big round sun peeped blazingly over the distant mountain at their rear. Now they stood on a little ridge that overlooked the terrorizing desert, which stretched out in great space, gradually melting into a horizon of sea blue. The only moving objects of this level expanse were two small specks far off in the hazy distance. Already, if we should have been out there, we would have easily observed that the riders showed signs of weariness. Their animals continued slowly onward, tired and unwilling, their heavy heads drooping low. For some time the two men talked in a low running conversation, but at length it came in mere whispers.

By this time they realized that they had been fools to attempt to cross the desert at sun rise, and that they should have waited until nightfall, but, of course, the thought of being captured by a crazed mob had impelled them to depart with great haste. The sun was rising higher and higher every moment, and it was not long before their throats seemed parched. Good God, was night never coming? Was that blistering sun never going down? They hung withered in their saddles, their eyes peering strangely ahead into that something which seemed to sway in the air before them. It was that ever-present lure—the lure of the desert. Suddenly there came a groan and one of the horses fell from exhaustion. The rider's companion did not seem moved in the least, his only thought being to cross that desert while his steed possessed ample strength. It was not long, however, before his horse fell, too, but by that time he hardly discerned what had happened. He did not struggle against the heat now as he lay motionless on the white sand beside his horse. Still, he felt confident that his last moments had come. Then rising to a sitting posture, he drew from the pocket of his plaid shirt, a stubby pencil, and dragging himself over to where his horse had fallen he wrote a few words on the shiny leather saddle. He grasped the pommel sternly as he wrote with unsteady hand. He wrote, wrote. Would he ever finish that long story? He was determined that no misunderstand-

ing should ever arise as to his identity, nor that the blame for his black deeds be cast upon another man's shoulders.

He was not at this task a great while, however, yet, as I have said, to his estimation it seemed quite lengthy. Perhaps this was due to the fact that he was longing for that eternal rest—the rest that intercepts all suffering. Never, for an instant, did he lift his pencil to think or construe over that which had been written, nor was he at loss for more words. It was probably because of his frequent contemplation on the matter that words came so freely and with such precision.

Far to the south, a shapeless speck moved across the brown, open waste in search of two individuals. Had we been at close range, we might have described the band as a dejected, discouraged lot, ready to turn back to "God's Country" at the word of command.

"God! I'm glad we've got enough water with us,—I wonder how those two desert rats are watering themselves out here?"

"Sam," returned Nat Henderson, who was riding beside the old plainsman, "I suppose your money is quenching their thirst."

The old man grinned, but soon his face wore that same old frown.

"I reckon we've gone as far as we dare, Sam," ventured forth one of the men in the group. "Hadn't we better turn?"

The leader was not moved a particle by this suggestion, his eyes still scanned the vast, veiled distance. His resolute mind forbade him to turn—to turn cowardly from death. Was he to slink away without restoring his money just because heat cautioned? No! And to that his teeth snapped, glued together by the firmest determination. He raised his hand over his eyes, partially shading them from the blinding sun, but could see nothing.

Suddenly they came upon a small ridge or knoll and this afforded an excellent observation of the immediate vicinity. Again he raised his large hand to his eyes, and as he did so he beheld two dark spots against the yellow sand background far away. Instantly he drew the boys' attention to the matter, spurred his exhausted steed into an easy trot, and drew up close to the designated place. He uttered a few inaudible words as he leaned forward over the pommel, staring anxiously down in his direct front. Soon he swung from out the saddle, exclaiming: "We've got the devils, after all!"

Butler drew his ominous revolver, as did the others, and held it poised in his right hand in case he should be obliged to use it. Bending slightly forward, his eyes came suddenly in contact with something strange—something he had never dreamt of seeing at this time. It was a message on the saddle. Strangely, as it may seem, his revolver dropped, his lips parted, and directing his quivering

hand to the rude slate, he employed his forefinger as guide from word to word as he read:

"I have led the life of a criminal; I have plundered and robbed. I have had my punishment, I have had my rewards, and thank God I'm getting my last one now. The fifty thousand dollars which you find in my blouse belongs to Samuel Butler. It was taken from old Munson, the stage pilot."

"Unwillingly yours,

"Winston Morgul Simmerton, Alias

Seymore L. Bradford.

Butler became intensely interested as he read and re-read the note, looking inquiringly at the men who sat sullenly upon their steeds above him. He knew that this was no uncommon or impossible tragedy of the West, but still the conception of him being involved made it appear even more ghastly.

"Henderson, Boswell, McCarthy—little help here. See what's in his possession."

The two boys and the little Irishman at once complied to orders, dismounting and making their way to where Bradford lay. As Nat turned him face-upward there came a sudden recollection as to the man's identity. Those piercing eyes which Nat had met before were now set and glassy; his face unshaven, but already bronzed by a western sun. And that scar—the scar on the left hand, interpreting to the world that, perhaps, a knife in an

opponent's hand had flashed too freely. Then his eyes shifted to the writing on the saddle. Instantly Nat stood erect, grasped Ray by the wrist, pointing violently to the dead body.

"Good God!" in one long sigh. "I didn't recognize the man when he played that game of cards with you, Butler. Had I known it was Bradford, I would—but, but," and Nat stepped back, gritting his teeth and peering into space. "He's my—my uncle, Winston Simmerton!"

"Yis, and be Gad, he's me enemy," broke in the Irishman, with considerable alacrity, walking briskly toward the body. "I 'member well, me b'y, when that lobster took a dollar from me wife—yes, sir—came right up to her and snatched it as beeg as you please. If Patrick had only been there, he'd fixed him. But thin I was in that pretty saloon just—"

"Now, see here, McCarthy, we don't care to hear your life history. Lay hold, and help the boys get this corps on the horse." By this time Butler had become indignant.

Some moments later they had prepared a rude litter of strong blankets fastened between two horses, and wound about the saddle pommels. Within this the lifeless bodies were placed, and as they moved off it swayed gently to the measure of the horses' tread.

Somewhere in this book I must write a paragraph or two **exclusively** about the desert, its many characteristics and **discredits**. The desert as a place to

live in is one of the salubrious on earth. The very same climatic features which renders it sterile gives to its wonderful air a purity nowhere else to be found. At first the desert horrifies the tourist, but to the man who has dwelt in it for some time it is nothing less than a life-giving air, a perfect panorama of the world. It is a place of fortune, of promise. It is a crystal in which you see your future. For miles and miles, like a dainty pencil line drawn across the face of the desert, winds the old, old Comanche and Apache trails, coiling from water-hole to water-hole. Were it not for these thread-like trails connecting different water places, the desert probably would be impassable, for the priceless water is life when out on that vast sea where water in reality is nothing more than sand.

In the desert, water is king! Without it, priceless ore is but as dross; fertile soils as worthless as ashes. The invisible Evil which soars in the air laughs at the tiny thing that ventures forth upon this expanse, spitting and defying: "You spite me from your green meadow, now it's my turn to the spiting, sir!" And, indeed, he does!

CHAPTER XII.

Good-bye to "The Sage-Brush State."

Several weeks fled; the funeral of the two men was over. They had been burried in the old cemetery south of White Rock.

Nat had teregraphed his mother telling of the death of her brother, but as yet had received no answer. Samuel Butler had obtained his money, became lawful proprietor of the Shawville & Lost River Mine, which he had purchased from young Henderson, and was now forging ahead with great success. The young boy had become wealthy, and though he was not a multi-millionaire, by no means, he felt assured that the little wallet would keep him and his mother the rest of their days.

Morning dawned with everything as solemn as if dead. Not even a branch of the pine quivered, nor was there a ripple on the nearby pool. The distant mountains flung off their black cloaks and displayed to the world the cloth of snow, which glittered brightly beneath the tender rays of a newly-born sun. The snow had fallen quite heavily that night, robbing the peak of its brownness, but, however there was something more novel hidden amid the shrubbery of the mountain. Some five hundred feet up that gradual sloping hillside, nestled the shacks of Butler's mining camp. Far to the right, nearly too far for the naked eye to behold, lay a tiny gray-colored cabin, from which dainty volumes of smoke arose. Through the field glass, the cabin was not rudely built, as one would expect. Laying aside the glass and winding among the bushes up the Cedar Trail one soon found himself right before the little cabin door. Just then emerging from a thicket of underbrush came Ray Boswell,

and his beautiful wife. Up the few steps they sprang, and without rapping on the door, entered.

The occupants of the cabin were not at all surprised at the sudden arrival of these individuals, for already Mr. and Mrs. Henderson had waited too long.

Old boy." broke in Nat, as he picked up the suit cases, and started for the door. "You know that little, old stage won't wait for us. We've got to move, and that's all there is to it."

In an hour, the newly-weds were sitting in some low-backed chairs in the postoffice, awaiting the arrival of the stage, which was due at any time. The same little crowd was gathered again in front of the office, swinging hither and thither, in search of gossip. Some were, however, expecting letters from folks in the outside world; a few looking for friends and relatives among the passengers.

"Here she comes!" announced someone, and all eyes were turned to see the coach come rattling down the main street. Two cowboys mounted on bronches, rode alongside the vehicle. They were dark, ugly-looking fellow; men who had been hardened by the desert's cunning ways. The pilot of the stage was a stranger in that vicinity, having hailed from some distant city in the East. He had taken up his new work as stage pilot just after the mysterious disappearance of Jerry Munson.

"I have learned that ye're off for the East, son," broke in Abe Carington, as the big coach pulled out

of White Rock. "Where's yer stopping place?"

"I presume it'll be Kelso, Idaho, as we have friends there," returned Nat, who had seated himself beside the driver.

"Wall, that's fine," was the return. "I know they're danged sorry to see yer leave this place."

Nothing more of any importance was said between them for some considerable time now, the man being too taken up with the handling of the horses and brakes. The cowboys, who had accompanied the old stage on its previous trips, had now been dismissed, as there were no dangerous places to be encountered.

After winding the hard pike for several miles, the outfit halted—halted on the ridge overlooking the Mesa. Already they felt the challenge—the warning, the lure, the haughtiness—that strange enticement which is an intense desire and an unsolvable mystery to all mankind. Abe hated it, loved it, but yet he feared it. Often as he had entered the land—the land of heat and loneliness—his very heart had yearned to learn the desert's secret—the secret of its lost decades.

"I have many times wondered, if God has actually forgotten this little spot on the globe," murmured Abe to Nat, while studying the space before him. "See," pointing back over his shoulder, "there are the green pastures, where man and horse makes gluttens of themselves; while here before us,

a vision of the devil himself greets us. Isn't it a mystery?"

Then, heedless of the desert's steadfast *warning*, he unfastened the brakes, and again they were on their way plodding through sandy trails.

For two days they did suffer; checking off the hours which faced them. They were bathed in heat; the condition of thirst becoming so terrible that it was but the normal condition. Nat no longer occupied the seat beside the driver, for the terrible heat of the sun had seemed to strike him with unbearable force.

During the greater portion of their journey, they experienced severe sand storms, which twirled their coach unnoticeably in an entirely different direction. Although this was soon discovered by Abe, he found that they were at least a day's journey in the wrong direction,, and of course, this meant more or less shortening of rations.

"Good God, man," yelled Nat up to the driver, "Is there no end to this place?"

Nat, receiving no reply, became suspicious, and realizing for the first time the horror of the desert, yelled again at the top of his lungs. Still there came no response. He opened the door and glanced upward, and to his eyes, he brought the scene of a real tragedy. On the scorched leather seat lay the body, the head and shoulders resting in a cramped position on the several bundles which lay on the roof at his rear. He was dead!

"He's dead!—The man's dead!" repeated the boy, hysterically.

And so—desperate with fear, with excitement, Nat flung open the door, and grasping the iron bracings that bordered the roof, pulled himself up in Western fashion. With a mighty crash of brakes the steady-loping team stopped. Ray and the two girls sprang from the coach, looked upward, and there saw Nat working desperately over the man's body in anticipation of discovering some sign of life.

"No use, Ray," quivered the boy. "He's dead."

The situation was indeed a dreadful one, not suited for the weak-minded, or those wrist-watch boys from the East. There they were, out in the open sea, the storm lashing hard against them. Should they turn—turn where? they did not know; direction was naught to them there. How long had they traveled without a guide? How were they to decide their direction? Questions of these kind sprang before them driving them nearly hysterical. In many a peril had Nat and Ray been involved, but never one more straining to the nerves than this one; a real catastrophe!

An hour later, as the party—still effected by the sudden death of the pilot—stood in the falling twilight, looking down upon the little grave, a chorus of wild, mellow howls broke the stillness. It was the evening call—the call of the coyote.

The upper rim was all that was left of that red sun, which once again was sinking below that ghastly stretch of sand. Around the travelers on every side lay the cooling desert under its calm sea of dainty colors, its veils of softly tinted vapor. Truly, they felt alone! Alone! Alone!

"Water! Water!"

Ray shouted the exclamation of joy; for he had sighted one of those precious water holes. Without the least hesitation, he grasped the canteen which had lain beside him, and jumped before the coach had halted. Nat tightened the brakes, and in a few seconds the team stood beside the water, too, lapping it with overwhelming eagerness, while the boys and their wives were contentedly sipping from the well-filled canteens.

"I calculate it ain't much use to continue our traveling to-night; for the horse sense we've got, I'm sure won't bring us to where we want to go, so let's camp for the night right here."

A second invitation was absolutely unnecessary. So, this they did and within an hour after the sun had dipped, their camp fire was the only artificial light on that expanse. The flicker of their light could be seen by the prowling coyote, who, though starving, never announced his presence save by the prolonged, weired cry. The peculiar wagon, a group of squatting figures, a bunch of stooping horses, were squarely within the blurred circle of light.

"I guess our Master means for us to remain here in this forsaken place. We've been in the desert for five days now with no food supply save the tiny bit for ourselves," and Nat puffed vigorously at his pipe. 'The horses haven't had a mouthful of green grass since we left Dewitt Hart Basin, some days past. Probably, there may be some fodder in that sack yonder, but I'm telling you that that's going to be served very sparsely, too, for it'll only last for a meal or two."

"It is rather strange that this journey is so lengthy. Carnington just the other day told us that his trips never exceeded two days, and here we've been a-drifting for five days, as near as I can reckon." Ray returned, dejectedly.

The speaker dropped his head slightly, peering into the dancing fire.

"I fear we shall never get out of this place," sobbed Mrs. Henderson. "And in the first place, I don't see why we had to choose the desert's trail. We could have followed the south fork of the Owyhee River just as **easy**, and at the same time we would have escaped **our** present situation, which is all but pleasant."

"That is all true, too, Mrs. Henderson," began Ray, glancing toward Nat's wife, "but that region shelters a **great number** of outlaws, who, more than once has robbed stages. It was on this very trail that Jerry Munson met his death some months ago."

Nat had left the group and was now ascending the stage coach which stood a little ways off. The recollection of having seen some valuable papers back on the vehicle had just occurred to him, and without disturbing the others, he had left in search of them.

In a few moments he returned, and seating himself besides the fire, he opened them and read to those who sat around him:

"The Buzzard Trail, like many desert trails, has its mysterious ways. The tender-foot knows them not; so excluding all details, I will endeavor to point out its direct course. By night, from White Rock to Mountain City, one may reach his destination by following the lighted path made by the brilliant stars of the dipper's handle. By day, 'tis best to have a guide, for the many trips I've made, I have not, as yet, discovered any way of determining save by the sun and distance. Briefly, as I assured, my method of determining direction has been told, and whosoever reads these lines, I hope that the information will prove as useful to them as it did to me when first I learned the desert.

The Pilot."

Nat lifted his head, and glanced at the interesting listeners, saying: "That news seems exceedingly beneficial in our predicament, does it not? So it

occures to me at any rate." Then he again consulted the paper.

"Come along, Ray; let's hitch up the horses to the wagon, and turn its tongue in the direction toward which this note indicates, and by morning I'm sure our route will be definite."

Young Henderson carefully folded the paper, deposited it in his shirt pocket, and in a short time was up, attending to the business which, he, himself, had suggested should be executed. Soon, however, one could plainly hear the creaking wagon as it was righted; the voices of the boys as they toiled away in the darkness, and the clinking of the horses' as they swayed to and fro. All this the girls heard, who still remained before the fire, chatting solemnly about the various things which were happening.

Fifteen minutes later, the boys had completed their task, unharnessed the beasts, and were now streached as comfortably as could be expected on an old horse blanket, greeting the moment that should bring sleep to their weary, disheartend bodies.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Arrival of the Boys.

The sun was setting fast in the Western sky; night veils were falling. In the great living room of a cabin in Idaho's wildreness, sat Greely and

Fulton, the latter's face bright and ingenuous with happiness. His eyes were resting on a sheet of paper which he had in his hands before the light of a tiny, flickering lamp. Undoubtedly, the news was of the best kind, for as he read, "found great wealth out here. Will arrive in Kelso on the sixteen train Friday evening, November fifth. Be prepared to greet our wives," his expression grew even brighter.

"Greely! What splendid news!"

Soon the reader's companion learned of the good news, and with a sudden bound, he grasped Fulton's shoulders, shouting an exclamation of joy.

The next day, Friday, a beautiful autumn-like day, Greely and Fulton started for the little depot ten miles from where they lived. Four extra horses were taken along for the purpose of supplying the newcomers.

It was not a great while after they arrived that the mighty train pulled in, puffing hard. Then it stopped for the first time since its starting at Paradise Valley, a little Western town beyond Black Ridge Peak. The first to alight were the people from White Rock. Though the boys had not been in Kelso for some time, everything had not changed. They remembered the general store and saloon which stood at the corner of the town facing a great plain. A bleached and faded sign read "The Maiden." The letters now seemed to be shrinking from public gaze, seemingly ashamed of themselves.

Liquor was still to be obtained at the store, however. Men were of the same nature, confident, and hard-hearted, burdened the heavy solitude of that wilderness. They lounged about the place, gossiping gaily of the great opportunities in the North Country, and the great East. Then his eyes lowered upon those worn, awkward hands. Could they do the work of the East, the dainty office job? Surely they could do the work of the famous North Country, with its jobs of "work or starve;" the jobs where hand and not mind made food.

As the new arrivals passed the place, the men gave them a hearty welcome, asking unaccountable questions.

"Wall, sir," broke in one old man, "Yer has ther dangedest ginger of any lad I've ever seen, I'll tell yer thet, and boy, don't be ashamed of it, either."

"Thank ye, Seth," returned Nat, politely, "but swallow those compliments."

It was nigh onto seven before our friends reigned round a bend in the road, bound for the little cabin in the dell. Nearly all the way home they rode in groups of twos, the ponies even then crowding too closely. Tiny lizards of the stones scurried away from either side of the trail. One after the other a little group of mountain quail tripped by. The cunning coyote watched from his cave, with eyes and smell on the alert. Without the least doubt it was the most picturesque region in all the wide universe, always unexcelled in its grand-

eur , ruggedness and life-giving qualities. The stream by the wayside chattered as they passed, and the pine seemed to answer from its mansions on the hillside.

The atmosphere was invigorating, so much so that it seemed to bring an optimistic view point of seeing things. As they came upon a high mound, they turned in the direction from whence they came, and far away in the distance, two—three—four miles, lay that ever beautiful valley of the Ten Sisters, with its climbing pines, laughing waterfalls and green meadows. Surely no place in the wide world seemed more inviting to their fancies.

The sun dipped, and the veil of evening came. Shadows fell fast and thick as a fog.

Up a steep trail they went, the horses clambering hard beneath their heavy weight. Ten minutes later we find them at the summit silhouetted in striking figures against the orange tint of a full moon.

"Well," broke in Nat, addressing the whole group, "I guess we've had our ups and downs, and fighting of all kinds, but now I know the star of health, wealth and prosperity shines brighter than ever before us."

"And," drawled out Fulton, happily, "and, maybe it would make you feel a grain happier if I should tell you that your mother arrived from the East last evening, and is now preparing the dandiest

supper you ever ate."

"Whow! That's great news! Hooray for all the gods, heroes, and rattlesnakes of this bloomin' country!" cried Nat, excitedly.

"And, maybe, Nathan, if I should tell you that you are the hero of the far stretching West, it would make you feel normal again," Mrs. Henderson broke in, with a bit of laughter in her twinkling eye.

END.

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